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INTERVIEW

Freestyling Animals and Signifying Rappers

LOS ANGELES — Behind every face there is a mask. In Ray Anthony Barrett's solo exhibition Word is Bond at Diane Rosenstein Fine Arts in Hollywood, the artist investigates American cultural identities through the use of anthropomorphized masks.

Alicia Eler

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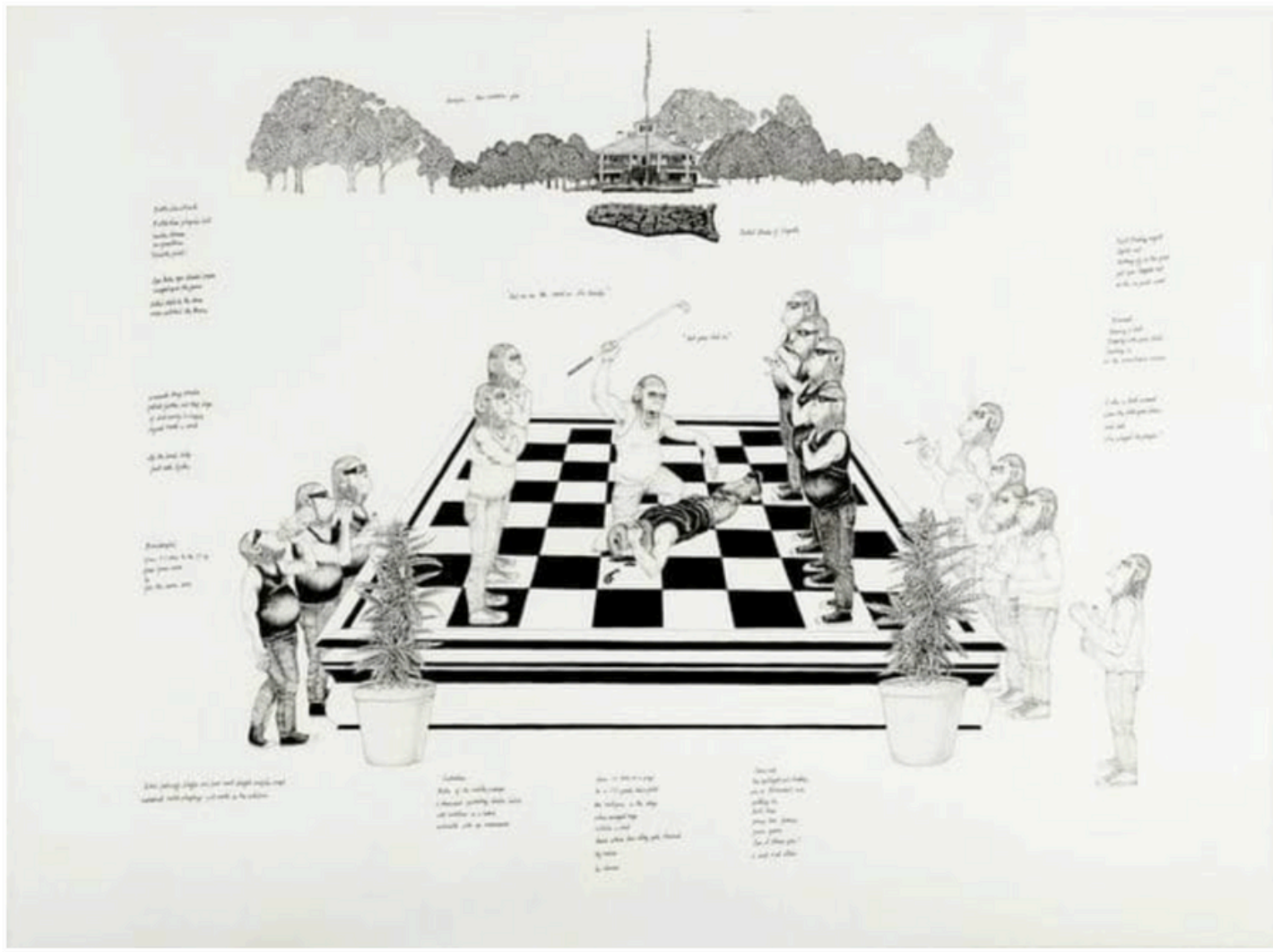
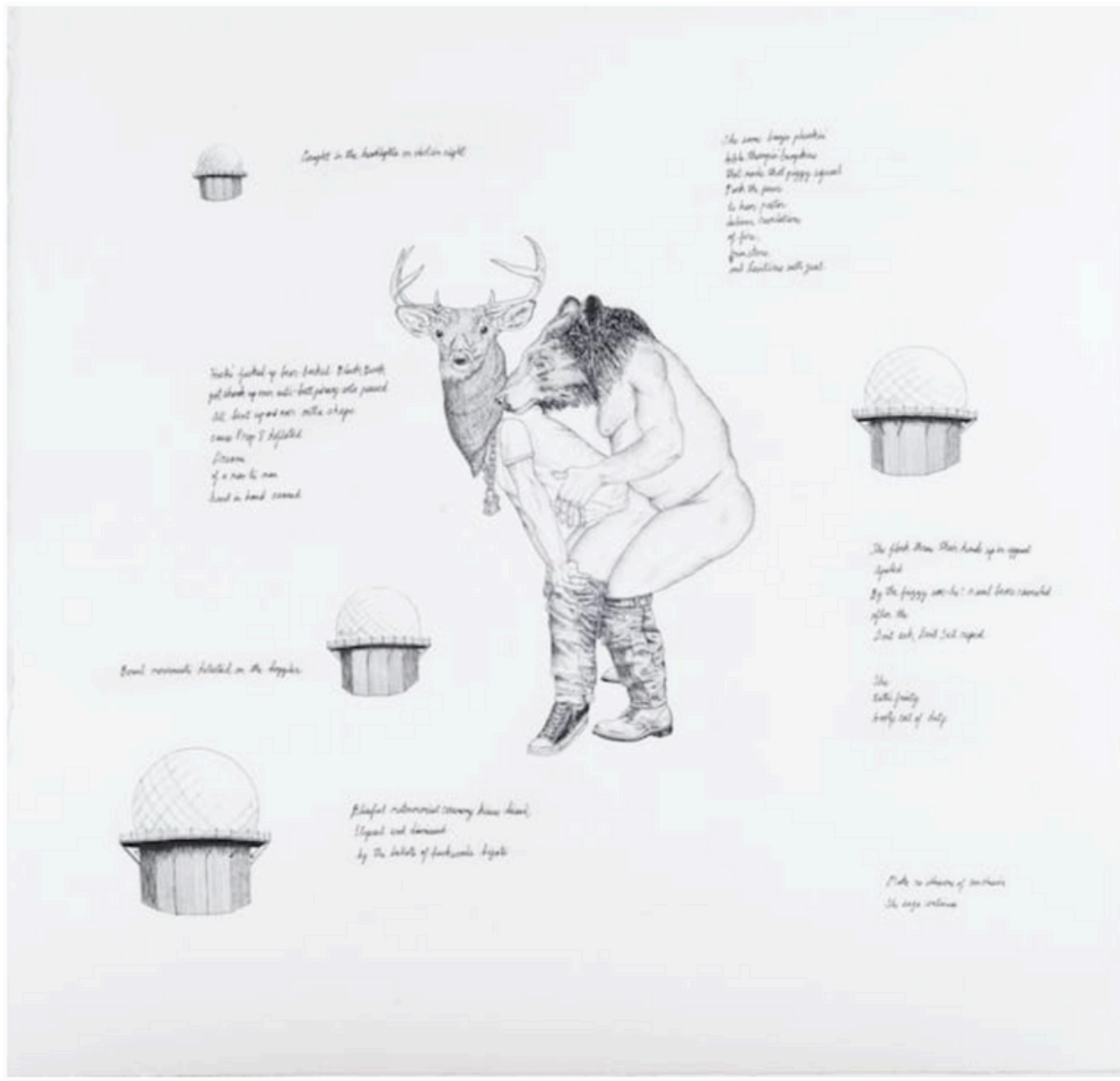


Ray Anthony Barrett, "Porchmonkey Pawns For Manicured Lawns Jockey For Position Without Inquisition (Battle Chess), (from Porch Monkeys) (2014l) (all images courtesy of the artist and Diane Rosenstein Fine Arts)

LOS ANGELES — Behind every face there is a mask. In Ray Anthony Barrett's solo exhibition Word is Bond at Diane Rosenstein Fine Arts in Hollywood, the artist investigates American cultural identities through the use of anthropomorphized masks. Dividing up the four walls of the gallery's project room, Barrett considers the masked identities of sexualities, the redundancy and spectacle of American mass media's 24-hour infotainment cycle, and contemporary iterations of Manifest Destiny as embodied through consumer culture's commodification of native figures like Crazy Horse and other American Spirits and "spirits."

Barrett also wades into the billowing paradoxes of '90s hip-hop culture, playing with words much like rappers themselves. In the centerpiece of his exhibition, "Porchmonkey Pawns for Manicured Lawns Jockey For Position Without Inquisition (Battle Chess), (from Porch Monkeys)" (2014), an arrangement of figures that Barrett has named with the slur "porchmonkeys" line the squares of a giant chessboard, squaring off, arranged as they would stand on a basketball court or in a nightclub. Wearing shades, they stand with an unflinching gaze, watching one of their own get beaten with a golf club, a symbol of wealth and power. Barrett's careful cursive above the chessboard brings it together with dry wit: "Get your club on," he writes, as if egging the viewer on to further question the characters' motives. The viewer just gazes intently, wondering who will take the crown.

Hyperallergic got in touch with Barrett to learn more about his nuanced social commentary and the way masks function in the contemporary mythologies that he creates by putting pen to paper, both lyrically and figuratively.

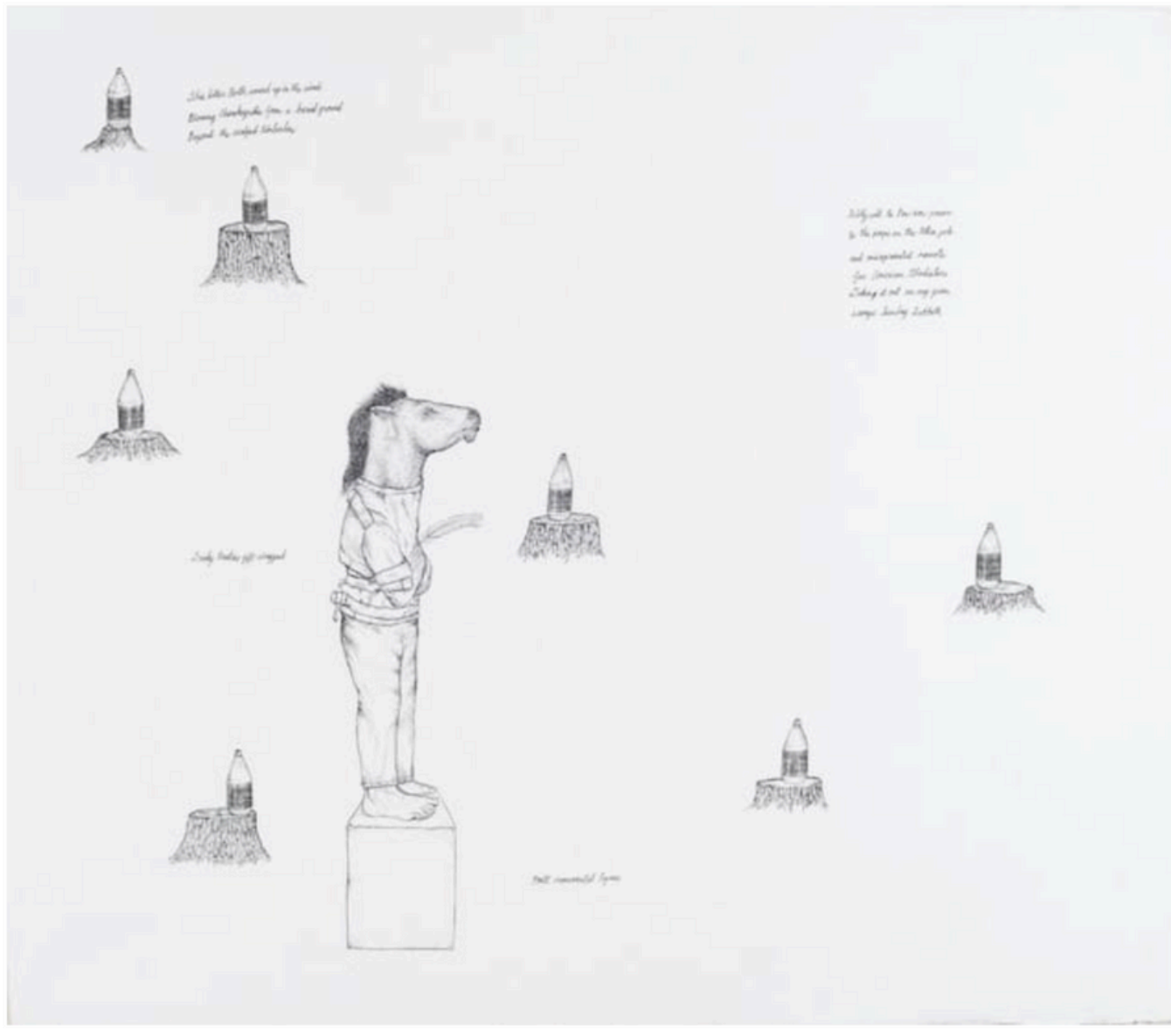


Ray Anthony Barrett, "Bear Bare-backing Buck" from Ruff Ridin' (2014) (click to enlarge)

Alicia Eler*: Each image is so time and labor-intensive, and at certain points I look at one and just think of the lost art of illustration, or at least using techniques of illustration. Tell me a bit about the process of each drawing, and why you use ink-on-paper? Talk a bit about the call-and-response technique you utilize in each drawing. To me it is like a visualization of the call-and-response technique in music, where one musician throws out a sound and the second one responds to it. It's interesting to think about call-and-response within the space of one artist calling out and responding to the work that he makes, which also acts as a sort of mirroring back-and-forth of ideas, like a conversation with one's own creative psyche that's all contained in a singular image. Tell me about the process here for you, your influences, etc.*

Ray Anthony Barrett: I free-associate and write rhymes in pocket journals everyday. It's like freestyling. Instead of improvising lyrics vocally, my freestyle is a handwritten flow — a stream-of-consciousness, which is the source of all my imagery.

For instance, a word or line will stand out from one of these flows and I'll then draw in response to it — often as literally as possible. I'll write verses on the same page in response to the drawing, culminating in a pictorial rhyme, which is like a conversation with myself where I fulfill the role of both caller and respondent. I think there's something poetic in the process of a work that starts out as a line of ink on paper and ends up as lines of ink on paper — resulting in another form of mirroring.



Ray Anthony Barrett, "Crazy Horse" from Treaty Treatises (2014)

AE: *Animals! Why so many animal masks for each of the human figures in your works? A small baby becomes a puppy, a bull dyke on a bike becomes a bull dog (or dawg), the Crazy Horse figure is literally a man with a horse head, and the pawns on the chess board all become these sort of aloof chimpanzees. We've talked a bit about the social masks revealing more than they conceal, but I was also thinking about the language of corporate advertising — like Joe Camel, the Camel Cigarettes guy. In the '70s he was this handsome, rugged blonde man with one of those sleezy mustaches — an adventurer of sorts targeting "young urban men, ages 18 to 34, middle class with moderate liberal social values," which we could easily identify as an early hipster type. Joe Camel (Old Joe) took over in the late 80s, thus anthropomorphizing the Camel Guy of the '70s. So I'm seeing a through line between this advertising technique and your critique of the commodification of indie, countercultures, and subcultures. Talk about how this relates to your work.*

RAB: The animal masks are derived from the anthropomorphic language of the derogatory, the slur, the slander, the slight, and sometimes a historical figure, or a logo.

I think of it as a form of signifyin', which is a type of wordplay that is full of cultural references and metaphors that complicate meaning. It has links to the tactics employed by tricksters in African American folklore. I consider my Porchmonkeys and Jungle Bunnies to be part of a folk lineage that traces back to Br'er Rabbit and the Signifying monkey, and even further to their origins on the African Continent.

I think labels are like masks or totems. And identity is like a masquerade. We have been using animals to identify with groups for tens of thousands of years. Corporations that have animal spokespeople and mascots understand this aspect of our culture and exploit it to get people to identify with their brand.

Ray Anthony Barrett, "While Jungle Bunnies Hip-Hop the Doom Broom" from Porch Monkeys (2014)

AE: *I'm interested in the arrangement in the gallery — everything is at eye-level except for the drawing ". . . While Jungle Bunnies Hip-hop The Doom Broom (from Porch Monkeys)" (2014). Why?*

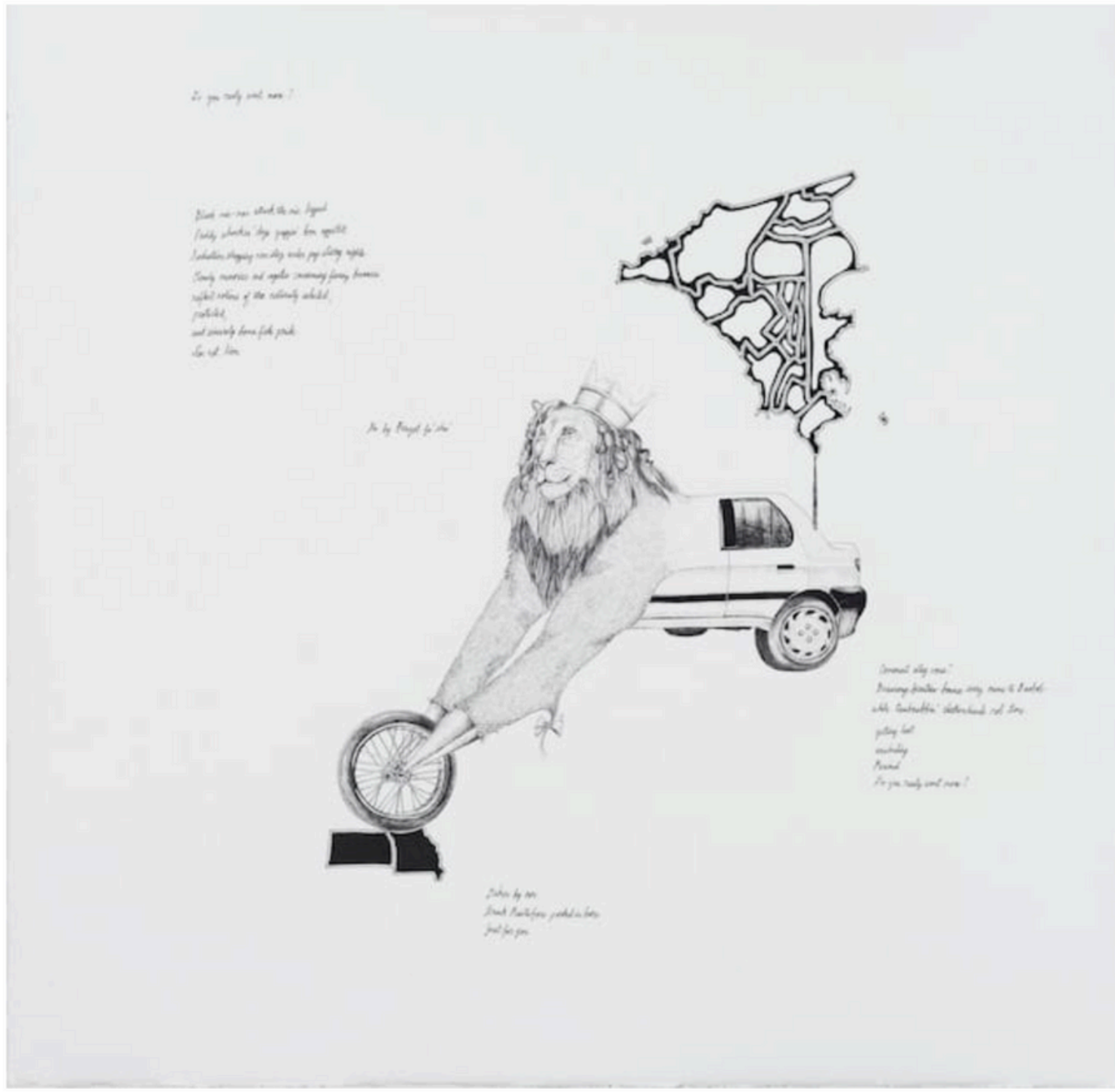
RAB: I used the rhythm in the drawings as a guide for the installation of the exhibition. Having that piece hung near the floor has two functions, it creates an interruption and it invites the viewer to get low. In Black music and African textiles there's a tradition of syncopation — an unexpected break in patterning. Often a dancer will respond to such a break in music by dropping to the floor.

AE: *In each of the drawings, there's this clear flow of lyrics — they're quite poetic and definitely '90s hip-hop-inspired, which is fascinating to think about in relation to the way that corporations/big brands/advertising are slowly co-opting the language of counterculture, as usual, rendering it all empty signifiers, meaninglessness mass marketing as we see in this Gawker article about "the saddest tweet of all time" from Burger King's Twitter account. Can continuing to use hip-hop rap lyrics and poeticisms work to combat the homogenization of language, particularly on social media and in the urban dictionary?*

Ray Anthony Barrett, "Unseeing Eyes Glued to Inflated Boobtubes" (from Boobtubes) (2013)

RAB: Yes, to an extent. Hip-hop is a trickster vernacular — it's full of hybrids, playful, always shape-shifting, and as soon as the society of the spectacle, to borrow Debord's terminology, gets a hold of it, it's already changing into something else — a new word is born from the source of the hip-hop lexicon and the old one remains an empty commodity to be consumed. Like *jiggy* it's got no juice anymore, and hasn't for a long time. With nearly eight million definitions, the open-sourced Urban Dictionary is an example of how the rules of "combat" demand more of a personal, micro-level engagement — like guerilla warfare, but with the alchemy of words.

AE*: There is a lyrical story you're telling through the arrangement and continuity of these works. What is it, and why is it important today?*



Ray Anthony Barrett, “From No Place, To Home” (from Dakar) (2014)

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An artist trades abstract canvases for pop-up soul food

By Amy Scattergood Los Angeles Times May 8, 2019

Ray Anthony Barrett's greens, with kale, chard, avocado and pistachios.
Photo by LOS ANGELES TIMES

LOS ANGELES — Under an overcast February sky at Paramount Pictures' backlot — which was set up to resemble a New York City street embedded with art installations, including paintings of laundry strung between faux brownstones — Ray Anthony Barrett plated a meticulous and tiny take on hoppin' John, deconstructed sweet potato pie and diminutive Maldon salt-studded hoe cakes.

It was the Los Angeles debut of the Frieze art fair; it was also a fitting if perhaps ironic setting for Barrett to be doing his culinary pop-up Cinque. He spent most of his life not as a cook but as a visual artist, not unlike the 70 or so vendors whose art filled the fair. He's won awards; he's had solo exhibitions.

But cooking is his central form of expression now.

"The interesting thing about going from art to food is realizing that food is the most political thing," said Barrett, his tortoiseshell glasses and graying goatee providing a look less culinary than academic. His most recent tattoo? From Apicius, the 1st century Roman cooking book.

"All these stories are embedded into food: culture, access, environment."

Barrett calls his food project Cinque because he is Ray Anthony Barrett V but also as reference to Joseph Cinque, the West African man who led the 1839 revolt aboard the slave ship Amistad.

He describes his cooking as soul food, quoting the chef Carla Hall's definition of the term. "It's like the difference between a hymn and a spiritual," wrote Hall in her new cookbook, contrasting Southern food with soul food. (Also, wrote Hall: "black cooks.")
He planted a tiny spoon into a cup of sweet potato puree and cream dotted with crispy bits of sugared pastry, as he told me the prisms of his cooking are his mother's Kansas City, Mo., kitchen, many hours watching the Food Network, a stint during art school in Senegal ("all I could remember was the food") and a lot of research.

"I think very few people realize how much research goes into art," Barrett said a few weeks later as he cooked in the kitchen of the Spanish-style, '20s-era apartment he shares with his wife, Samira Yamin, a visual artist who helps with pop-ups, and their two cats, Rocky and Apollo (he is a devout fan of the "Rocky" franchise).

Their apartment is, predictably, loaded with art, including some of Barrett's work, intricate animal-focused line drawings, plus repeating stacks of books (Taschen's Atlas of Human Anatomy and Surgery, Escoffier, David Hockney, Samin Nosrat, Jorge Luis Borges, John T. Edge, John Baldessari, the first Joe Beef cookbook).

Barrett holds an MFA and has a day job, as art assistant to the artist Mark Grotjahn, but what he's been focused on for the last five years is cooking. Barrett moved to Los Angeles after graduating from the Pacific Northwest College of Art in Portland, mounted shows and had some success, but by early 2014 he was burnt out and drinking too much. So he got sober and started filling his weekends with cooking projects.

"It's ironic, because a lot of the pejoratives in the art world are strengths in the food world," said Barrett. "A dependence on craft. Nostalgia. But nostalgia is a really big strength in food." As is "making something beautiful," something that he says can be a criticism in visual arts these days.

Barrett worked at a catering kitchen and did stages at Naomi Pomeroy's Portland restaurant Beast, at JuneBaby in Seattle and at Jeremy Fox's Santa Monica restaurant Rustic Canyon.

"I knocked on the back door; somebody said that's what you do. And so I showed up with my knife roll and my clogs, and Jeremy was like, 'Here, I'll get you an apron.'"

"We loved Ray. Real quickly he was part of the family," Fox told me by phone. Barrett worked at Rustic Canyon for about six months, from dishwashing to pastry to working the line to making staff meals. "He'd do these great African-inspired meals," said Fox, who eventually offered Barrett a full-time position. (Barrett kept his art day job.)

Barrett befriended Robin Koda, the Japanese American farmer who runs Koda Farms with her family, and Minh Phan, the chef of Porridge + Puffs. Phan lent him her rice cooker for the Frieze event and said of Barrett, "I think his food and cooking is a way for him to explore his roots, making it relevant for people who don't have the same connection as he does. All done on his terms, in his narrative — a narrative that I think is important for L.A. right now."

He did his first pop-up last summer at the Underground Museum, an art space in Arlington Heights. A few catering gigs followed, then the pop-up at Frieze, where he was one of a few food vendors, alongside Jessica Koslow's Sqirl Away and chef Kwang Uh's cult Korean project Baroo.

"Why do I cook what I cook?" Barrett repeated when I asked him the question as he stirred his version of greens, a saute of mustard greens, kale and chard bound together with avocado and finished with pistachios and lime. "I saw some chefs cooking hoppin' John" — a quintessential Southern dish traditionally made with field peas, rice and ham — "and it didn't look like the hoppin' John I grew up with. And I felt like I had something to contribute."

He started out with his mother's recipe, then added some technique, and eventually transformed it, "personalizing it" to the version he now serves, which is just as California as it is Southern. "The only way I can own it is to make it current."

Barrett's take on maafe, a West African groundnut stew, translates into short rib skewers grilled on an outdoor hibachi, then topped with peanut sauce and wasabi sprouts; his hoe cakes, made with Anson Mills corn — he routinely employs ingredients from producers committed to heirloom sourcing or growing — and kefir, are small unsauced disks. "I think we've reached critical mass on cornbread in a skillet," he said. The deconstructed sweet potato pie he makes in his kitchen is topped with torched meringue and plated on a gorgeous saucer from Mount Washington potter Beth Katz; Barrett's version of bissap, "the OG red drink," is made with hibiscus, orange flower water, mint, ginger and sparkling water.

"I wanted to create a road map," Barrett said, one that traced his family's heritage from West Africa to Louisiana and Alabama to the Midwest and eventually to California. "Food brings its own past with it," said Yamin, perched on a chair, eating warm hoe cakes in her kitchen. "You're pulling these histories into the present."

Where Cinque goes from here, Barrett is still feeling out. More pop-ups and events, more catering gigs. He's still got his day job, the art on the walls coexisting with the art on the plates.

"Right now, it's closer to a project than a regular job," said Barrett. "We don't want to be the help."

California greens